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SUBJECT: Leading Tamil Editor Receives Death Threats

REF: Colombo 812

1. (U) Summary: Following the high-profile April 29 murder of Tamil commentator Dharmaretnam Sivaram, (Reftel), another prominent Tamil journalist, VEDIWEL THEVARAJ, Acting Editor-in-Chief of the mainstream independent Tamil daily Virakesari, has reported receiving anonymous death threats. Mr. Thevaraj does not know who has been making the threats, just as the police still have not been able to identify Sivaram's murderers a month after his slaying. Reporters Without Borders submitted a letter May 24 to the Minister of Public Security, Law and Order expressing concern for the safety of Mr. Thevaraj. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Virakesari (circulation: 125,000) is the most mainstream of Sri Lanka's independent Tamil papers. Although generally considered neutral, it has become somewhat more sympathetic to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since February. Virakesari does not openly criticize the LTTE nor take a position regarding other political parties, but does publish the statements of rival Tamil groups such as the EPDP (Douglas Devananda's Eelam People's Democratic Party) and TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front). Although Mr. Thevaraj is known among his colleagues as an LTTE sympathizer with good relations among senior LTTE members, his reporting in Virakesari has been very balanced. He has never directly criticized the LTTE in his writings, but neither has he been their cheerleader. Moreover, Thevaraj was a close friend and former classmate of Sivaram.

3. (U) According to a statement filed May 25 by Mr. Thevaraj to the Superintendent of Police, unidentified persons speaking both Sinhala and Tamil phoned the Thevaraj home on April 29th and 30th, while Mr. Thevaraj was in Australia. The callers allegedly told the journalist's niece, who took the calls in his absence, that her uncle would be the next to be killed. According to Mr. Thevaraj, he visited the home of the late Sivaram on May 1st, from 3:30 to 9:30 PM, where he saw a gray "Intercooler" jeep with tinted windows, similar to the vehicle in which Sivaram was allegedly abducted, parked outside the house. The next day, he reported seeing the same jeep parked outside his own house gate, with the engine on, between 12:30 and 2:30 a.m. Mr. Thevaraj stated he received similar threatening calls on his direct office line in English, Tamil, and Sinhala on May 2nd and 3rd. Frightened after receiving the threatening phone calls, Mr. Thevaraj said he decided to visit his sisters in Canada, where he remained from May 6th to May 21st. Since returning to Sri Lanka, he said he has not received other threats.

4. (SBU) Mr. Thevaraj, visibly nervous and agitated, told PAO and IO on May 26 the threatening callers had said, "You supported Sivaram, so we have marked you." The caller who allegedly phoned Thevaraj at work on three consecutive days spoke English, Sinhala and Tamil: "Perfect Sinhala and colloquial Tamil," said Thevaraj, "not Jaffna or Batticaloa Tamil; the kind a Sinhalese person would speak." Thevaraj said he and Sivaram had been close friends and colleagues for the past six to seven years. When asked who might have threatened him, Thevaraj said eight to ten years ago he had received threats from the anti-LTTE EPDP (Eelam People's Democratic Party), though he had "not criticized the EPDP." He said he had been critical of the Karuna faction, but did not believe the Eastern Tigers to be the perpetrators of the threats against him or Sivaram's murder, instead implicating the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the government's junior alliance partner, and "government-side intelligence" for the latter incident. Thevaraj added, "Most of the Tamil journalists feel themselves to be in danger," and agreed that many would increase self-censorship following the latest threats. Thevaraj said he would not censor himself. On May 1st, he said, he published his own positive eulogy of Sivaram in the Sunday Virakesari despite recent threatening calls received at his residence. However, he told us, "The police inspector told me as a friend to leave this country, that the police couldn't guarantee my safety."

5. (SBU) Conversely, News Editor of Virakesari, Prabagan Ratnasabapathy (protect), told IO he "cannot confirm there was a real threat." He implied that this incident might be a

ploy by Thevaraj to obtain an immigrant visa to Canada through an asylum petition, stating Mr. Thevaraj had been denied a visa that would allow him to work for a Tamil paper there. Another senior journalist, Lucien Rajakarunanayake (protect), took the alleged threats against Mr. Thevaraj more seriously: "Mr. Thevaraj was a close friend of Sivaram. Sivaram had contributed most recently to the Sunday Virakesari on the 24th of April, in which he was critical of [Norwegian Special Peace Envoy] Erik Solhiem and the peace process in general. With the way things happen, the calls may have been just to frighten [Mr. Thevaraj], but knowing the condition of Tamil journalists, there are several forces who may wish to threaten him. Mr. Thevaraj is certainly taking his own precautions now, but this threat will affect other Tamil journalists."

16. (SBU) Comment. The independent Virakesari newspaper has become more sympathetic towards the LTTE of late, perhaps due to pressure from the LTTE, which brooks little dissent from Tamil journalists. Just as Sivaram's murderers have not yet been identified (although a letter from a previously unknown Sinhalese group was widely sent out to embassies and press organizations three weeks after Sivaram's murder claiming responsibility), there appears no ready clue as to who threatened Mr. Thevaraj (and we tend to believe Thevaraj's story given his shaken condition and his willingness to endure several hours of police questioning). However, death threats to another prominent Tamil journalist lend weight to many Sri Lankan journalists' fears about freedom of the press here. Regardless of the source of the threats, they are adding to the sense of apprehension among the media and could lead to increased self-censorship. We will continue to monitor and report on these disturbing developments. End Comment.

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